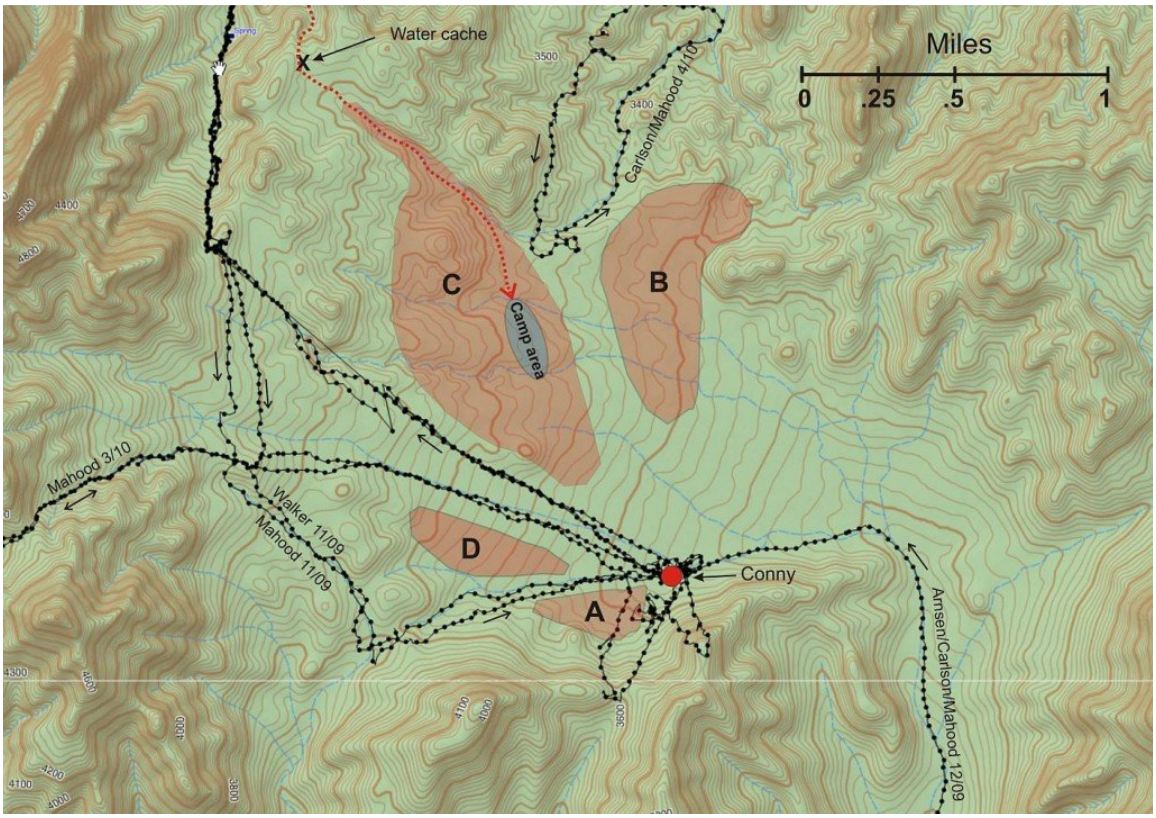
OtherHand

A whole lotta nuthin', 11/13-14/2010

With the water safely, if arduously, in place up on the edge of the plateau, it was time to start planning for a serious search trip. Pete Carlson, was of course on board, because Pete loves this sort of crazy adventure. Adding to the insanity was
Paul Caraher and Patrick McCurdy, more RMRU members freelancing. We set our date for November 13th and I whipped up the following oh-so-pretty plan:



The tentative search plan for this trip (T. Mahood)

The plan showed where the water was placed, GPS tracks of previous trips I'd been involved

with and what looked to be a reasonable area to set up camp. It was broken down into four potential areas that hadn't been previously covered, and could offer some opportunities. The area boundaries weren't hard and fast, and much would depend on what the terrain looked like when we saw it (i.e., making it up as we go along).

- Area A: The southerly slope area just west of where Conny's remains were found and was my understanding of the location of Egbert's remains. However not much was found. This area, and possibly slightly further west, could turn up more clues to Egbert.
- Area B: I had a strong hunch this was the area the Germans first came on to the plateau, on the way to their final spot. Pete and I explored a bit of it previously on our N3 hike, but didn't go further east as we didn't think it was possible to get to the plateau that way. Turns out the topography acts as a natural funnel around the East-West ridgeline. The idea would be to look for any traces of the Germans passage (bottles, personal effects, etc).
- Area C: If the party had even a general sense of where the van was, the children may have started out in this direction after the parents succumbed. The area appeared to be reasonable terrain and had never been searched.
- Area D: I had no special insight into Area D, other than when looking at the GPS tracks it was obvious the area hasn't been covered and isn't far from where the Germans ended up.

In the large December OES search there was a party (including some RMRU members) that headed north from Conny's site and traveled directly to Anvil Canyon. They would have passed through the areas between B and C, which is why I omitted that area.

So on Friday, November 12, we made our way to Death Valley and ended up at the Anvil Canyon trailhead late in the day to spend the night. The next morning we headed in. Following the burro trails was now second nature, and we made good time. Why not, since heading in is running downhill. Eventually we turned south and into the N1 canyon, this time being able to bypass Squaw Spring. A bit after Noon we reached the crest where the water was unmolested. I noticed I was still having trouble with the climb up the side canyon to the crest, breathing very hard.

After loading up our water supplies, we started downhill to the southeast, in the ravine

that would take us out on the plateau, and to the are we planned on camping. While going down the canyon, we spread out and searched as we traveled, but there wasn't anything of interest.

As we reached a point near where Pete and I had seen the mystery post, we turned south, climbed up out the the ravine and started to look for a likely camp site. Unfortunately the entire area was rocky and cobbled, not an inviting place to pitch tents. And if the wind picked up, it would be brutally exposed. We finally found a decent, if narrow spot, in a little ravine. There was enough of a sandy bottom that we could put our tents, but they all had to be done in a line.

Our camp in a canyon (T. Mahood)

It was only about 3 PM by the time we finished setting up camp, which left us time for a search. We thought we'd head northeast and do Area B (where I thought the Germans had perhaps first reached the plateau), then swing around sort of clockwise and head back to camp. We spread out laterally and did a variant of a line search. It's good we had GPS

units along, as our camp promptly vanished behind us and there was little indication of where it was. After an hour and a half, we felt we had covered Area B pretty well so we headed on back for the night.

The next morning we started early and headed south to the main site. Paul and Patrick had never been there and wanted to see what it was like. And I wanted to do some real serious, detailed searching where I had found the items on my day hike from Ballarat. It seemed unlikely I had stumbled upon all that there was.

Patrick stayed with me looking around for anything missed and Pete and Paul headed up to the saddle to the southwest, which we referred to as S2, staying in touch by radio. Paul explored the saddle area and Pete pushed quite a bit to the south, looking for any evidence of bottles or trash. None was to be found however. Meanwhile, despite my intense efforts, nothing new was to be found at the main site. It was now clean.

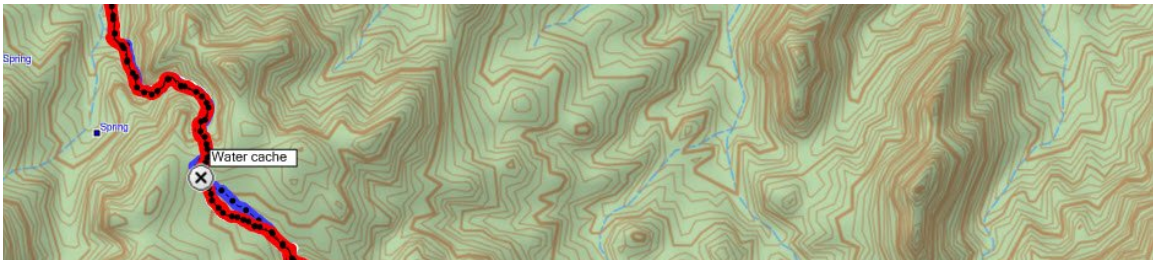
Eventually we regrouped and did a westerly swing through portions of Area D, then northerly towards camp. Along the way, there was a isolated hill we had gone by several times before as we had entered and exited the area, but never had the time or energy to climb it. This time, we did. It gave us a full panoramic view of the entire plateau. We could also see a good hunk of Area C, and what we saw suggested it wasn't worth the effort to search. It was the sort of thing that looked like a plausible area on a map, but then upon seeing the actual terrain you realize no one would purposely head that way when there were obviously better routes. So Area C was a bust.

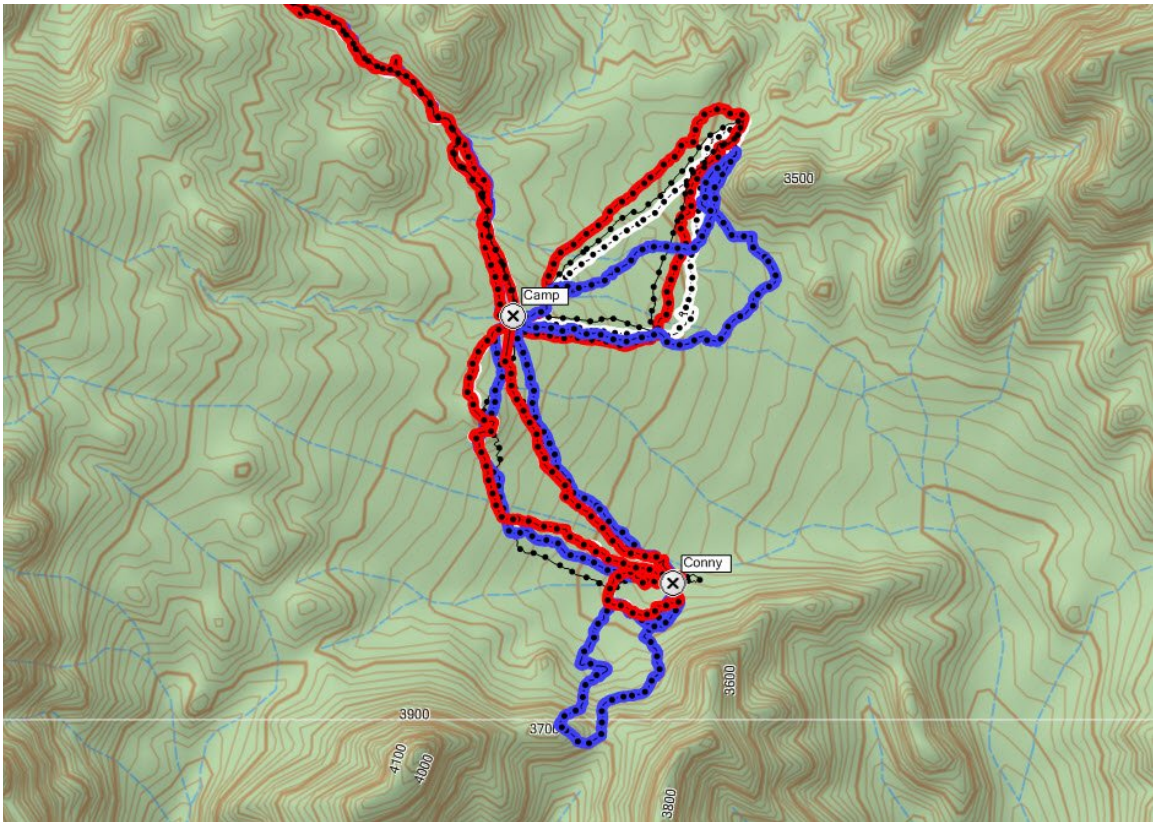
The entire area in a single picture – 360 panorama (T. Mahood)

A final look at the bluff before we head back to camp (T. Mahood)

Reaching camp, we had a discussion. We already had covered the most obvious areas we could. Certainly we didn't cover it all, but as always, we used the topography to fine tune where we actually searched. The idea of just randomly picking areas to walk around through didn't sound especially appealing to me, and I had a certain vague anxiousness and a desire to get out of the area. Part of it was that I wasn't exactly feeling 100%.

So we quickly broke down our camp and started the hell out of there. We knew that if we hustled, we could be home in our beds by late that night. As I was hiking out, I realized that absent any new, substantial data, this was going to be my last trip into here. It's such a remote place that there's always a sense of risk and exposure being there. And to me, it just wasn't worth it any more. We had covered all the logical areas, and a whole lot that weren't. What we had left was a whole lotta nuttin'. It was quite a letdown not finding evidence of the kids, but in the absence of any new clues, the only thing left to do was a line search of the entire plateau, something out of the question with our limited manpower.





GPS tracks for the final hike, one color for each person (except Pete) (T. Mahood)

We ended our downhill run when we reached Anvil Canyon, and started our slog back up to the vehicles at the trailhead. This is a slog I'd had done before, and it's always annoying. But this time it was worse. Much worse. I was lagging behind, almost exhausted, with a elevated pulse. I thought perhaps I was coming down with the flu, but there was no fever, just weakness. I thought I had been eating plenty, but Patrick talked me into taking some of his GU packs. In about 15 minutes I felt much better, and with the help of strategically timed packets of GU, was able to make it out of there.

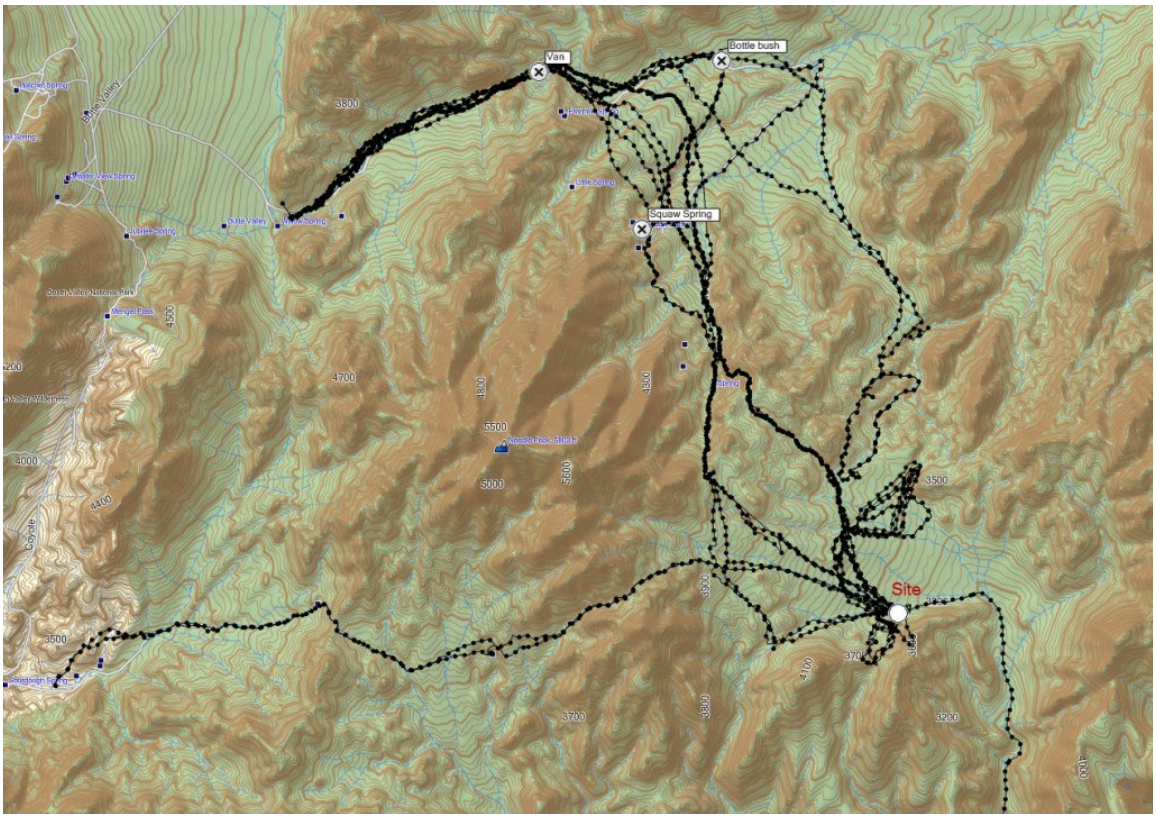
After our return, my pulse was still highly elevated, enough that I thought it was time to see the Doc. Turned out I was experiencing the onset of Graves Disease (a friggin' chick thing that hardly ever happens to guys!!), and my thyroid was locked into crazy overdrive. My metabolism was such that I needed to increase my food intake by about 50% to avoid hypoglycemia. This is what was kicking my ass on the trail, as well as on the water placement hike with Pete. It was also the cause of the elevated pulse rate and the nonspecific anxiety I was feeling. Had I known what was going on, there would have been no way I'd chance a trip into that area is this condition. As I write this, a year and a half later, the Graves has been taken care of and I'm back at 100%. Actually, that's not

right. I'm better than what would have been 100% back then. I was able to dump a lot of weight while getting the Graves under control and am now at a fitness level equal to where I was about 30 years ago. So it's worked out pretty well. But I'm still not interested in going back there!

So that's where my the story of the Germans wraps up. We didn't find the kids, but we cracked a pretty good missing persons case and brought closure to some families. Up until this point, the families never knew what happened to their loved ones, and were left to the devices of their imaginations. And that's usually not a good thing. And we had some really outstanding adventures while doing some good, something I'll always remember. I learned some valuable lessons, such as finding human remains in the backcounty subjects you to all sorts of bureaucratic craziness (my advice is to just phone in the GPS coordinates anonymously, then run like hell!), a lesson I'd end up applying in the not too distant future.

So, this was the end.

Ummmm,... No. Turned out I wasn't exactly right.....



The cumulative total of all our Death Valley GPS tracks (T. Mahood)

The final installment....

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